The Lives of a Book: *The Conjure Woman* through the Ages

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Abstract

In 1899 Houghton Mifflin published African-American writer Charles Waddell Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, which would ultimately become the most famous of his books. Looking at the context and the paratext of re-editions of this collection of stories between1899 and 2002, this essay endeavours to assess the extent to which these re-editions endowed the text with new possibilities for interpretation, and with a new status. As the text was ultimately canonised, the story of these editions also reflects the history, and the historiography, of African-American literature in the twentieth century.

The issuing of reprintings and new editions of a book is one of the most efficient ways of prolonging the life of that book, and of the text it contains, endowing it with multiple lives. In this way, books can survive across generations, sometimes in spite of small initial success, as texts, editors and readers combine in specific contexts to create the possibility for them to be 'reincarnated'. In the case of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, a volume of short stories and the Afro-American writer's first book, it is impossible to dissociate this question of reprinting from the broader subject of the publishing history of Afro-American literature in the United States. Indeed, the development of Afro-American studies played a crucial role in the reprinting of nineteenth- and even eighteenth-century Black writers. With these contextual questions in mind, it is interesting to examine

how *The Conjure Woman* was transformed between 1899 and 1993, and to note how the status of the author was modified in the process. This case study in turn raises broader questions regarding the importance of paratexts, the co-authorship of books between authors and editors and the canonising effect of reprint editions.

To understand how this book came to live several lives, it is first of all essential to appreciate the contexts and conditions of its reprintings, and the ways in which these were informed by the broader publishing history of Afro-American literature. With this publishing history in mind, these reprintings can then be studied through the prism of their paratexts – both the editorial advertising peritext and epitext – to understand the evolution of the book, as framed by its subsequent editors and prefacers. We may in fact distinguish three specific stages in this evolution: first, the original publication; second, the subsequent re-editions published between 1928 and 1973; third, the establishment of the 1993 scholarly edition which, as we shall see, presents a particular paradox.

The Conjure Woman is a volume of seven short stories set in the South of the United States during Reconstruction and written in the regional dialect. Each of the stories presents a dual narrative structure: a white Yankee narrator, John, who has bought a plantation in the South with his wife Annie, introduces the often extraordinary 'yarn' spun by a black narrator, a former slave named Uncle Julius who has always lived on the estate. These tales recount the days of slavery, relating the superstitions of slaves and their beliefs in 'conjuring' – or black magic. In this first book, Chesnutt's aim was not to bluntly present the tragedy of slavery, but rather to subtly question it through seemingly innocent tales.

The book was first published in two different formats by the mainstream Boston house Houghton Mifflin in 1899: a general edition, with a first printing of 1,500 copies, and in the same year, a limited Large Paper edition of 150 copies at the request of a bibliophilic club of Cleveland, where the author was then living. The sales were relatively small, but this did not deter Houghton Mifflin from publishing three more books by Chesnutt between 1899 and 1901: a second volume of short stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*

(1899), the novel of passing, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and the historical novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)[1].

In 1928, although the sales of *The Conjure Woman* and subsequent books had always been quite small – a total of 2,370 for the general edition of *The Conjure Woman* between 1899 and 1923[2] – the book was re-edited by the original publishing house, with an introduction by Columbia University professor of Comparative Literature Joel Elias Spingarn, whom Chesnutt had met as early as 1914 at the bibliophilic Rowfant Club[3]. This re-edition is all the more surprising as Houghton Mifflin had written to the author in March of that year asking him if he were interested in buying the plates, since the book was not to be reprinted[4]. In spite of uncertainties on the future of his book, the copyright had been renewed by Chesnutt in 1927, thus extending it until 1955[5]. It is not difficult to find a connection between this re-edition, the bestowal in 1928 of the Spingarn medal upon the author for his noble 'achievement' as an 'American Negro'[6], and the surge in Afro-American literature of the times, with the movement of the Harlem Renaissance. Joel E. Spingarn, the creator of the eponymous medal, greatly encouraged black artistic endeavours, alongside Afro-American poet James Weldon Johnson, Howard University professor Alain Locke and Carl Van Vechten. Several critics, including Spingarn himself, took

1. A fifth book, *The Colonel's Dream*, was published by Doubleday, Page & Co., in 1905.

2. Houghton Mifflin Papers, Book Sales, MS 2030 (32-33) – Houghton Library, Harvard University. A comparison with the sales of *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892), also published by Houghton Mifflin for author Joel Chandler Harris and to which Chesnutt's first tales would be repeatedly compared by critics, gives a better idea of the bad sales: in the same period (1899-1923), Harris's book sold 38,174 copies.

3. The Charles Chesnutt Papers at the Fisk University Library, Box 2, Folder 6. All further references to this collection are abbreviated CC and followed by the relevant box and folder numbers.

4. Letter from Houghton Mifflin to Chesnutt, 28 March 1928. CC 3:7.

5. Letter from Edward Robinson (Houghton Mifflin) to Chesnutt, 20 December 1926. CC 3:7.

6. This award, created by Joel E. Spingarn in 1914, was presented annually for the 'highest and noblest achievement by an American Negro during the preceding year'. In 1928 some of the members in the appointing committee were Theodore Roosevelt, Oswald Garrison Villard (publisher of the *New York Evening Post*, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison and a founding member of the N.A.A.C.P.), and Afro-American leader W. E. B. DuBois.

this opportunity to celebrate Chesnutt as a 'father' of Afro-American literature; it thus seemed an auspicious moment to re-edit his first volume. For Chesnutt, it was a chance to be 'put on the literary map again', as he wrote Houghton Mifflin editor Ferris Greenslet in 1929 (Chesnutt, *Exemplary Citizen* 245).

However, the publicity given to Afro-American authors during the 1920s and 1930s does not seem to have helped keep Chesnutt in the spotlight, although it did encourage him to submit – unsuccessfully – new material to new publishers[7]. Interest in his work only began to revive in the late 1960s, with the appearance of new scholarly editions of *The Conjure Woman* in 1968, under the impetus of academics, marking the beginning of a new phase in his literary reputation. In the intervening years, a biography of Chesnutt by his daughter Helen (1952) did not spark renewed interest in this discreet author, nor was there a wealth of scholarship relating either to him or his work[8].

The first paperback reprint of *The Conjure Woman* was published in the 'Americans in Fiction' series by The Gregg Press in 1968. The volumes in the series, selected by American literature professor and editor Clarence Gohdes[9], included a number of works of Southern fiction from the late nineteenth century, many of which had been published by Houghton Mifflin. The series included works by Joel Chandler Harris (*Gabriel Tolliver*: *A Story of Reconstruction?*; *Free Joe, and Other Georgian Sketches*), Thomas Nelson Page (*Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction*), Thomas Dixon (*The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden*) and by Albion Winegar Tourgée, one of Chesnutt's models (*Royal Gentleman*; *Bricks Without Straw, a Novel*)[10]. As is often the case with reprint series, the intention was not

7. *The Quarry* and *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.*, were submitted to Knopf in 1928, then to Houghton Mifflin in 1929, but were not published until 1999 by Princeton University Press.

8. The 1967 publication of Julian D. Mason Jr.'s 'Charles W. Chesnutt as Southern Author' was an important landmark in this development. The bibliographic information cited above has been taken from Campnell and the Mississippi State 'Checklist of Scholarship on Southern Literature'.

9. Clarence Gohdes was editor of *American Literature* magazine from 1932 to 1969.

10. The series also included fiction by Mary N. Murfree, a.k.a. Charles Eggbert Craddock

only to make available past examples of local colour writing, but also to delve into the treasures of fiction in the public domain, which insured cheap acquisition.

Contrary to this edition, which was a facsimile reprint of the original with no specific critical apparatus, the 1969 re-edition, published by Ann Arbor Paperbacks at Michigan University Press, included a preface by American literature professor Robert Farnsworth. The imprint, created around 1952, had already issued several works of interest to scholars in Afro-American studies, such as *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* by Dumont Dwight Lowell (1961), August Meier's now classic *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915*, and a reprint edition of Chesnutt's *The Wife of his Youth* (1968)[11]. Judging from the catalogue of the Library of Congress for the 1960s, a large majority – over 50% – of books of Afro-American fiction published in that decade were reprints. Indeed the 1960s, which saw the rise of the Civil Rights movements, were a time of re-discovery and re-appropriation of Afro-American culture. It was not until then that Afro-American literature came to be regularly taught at universities. According to anthologist and Richard Wright scholar Keneth Kinnamon, the sudden interest was sparked by the tragic events of the late 1960s:

> As predominantly white colleges and universities suddenly manifested interest in black studies after the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968, publishers began scrambling to meet the new demand for materials. (462)

Nevertheless, if Chesnutt was re-discovered within this historical context, he remained a 'minor author', according to Farnsworth himself, and only about a dozen scholarly papers devoted to him were published

(*In the Tennessee Mountains*), Owen Wister (*Lady Baltimore*), and Kate Chopin (*Bayou Folk*). Other local colour fiction could likewise be found, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (*Silent Partner*), Harriet Beecher Stowe (*A Minister's Wooing*; *Pearl of Orr's Island: a Story of the Coast of Maine*), Alice Brown (*Tiverton Tales*), and Mary Eleanor Wilkins (*A New England Nun, and Other Stories*). It is worth noting that Harris, Murfree, Stowe, Phelps and Brown had been Houghton Mifflin authors in the same era as Chesnutt.

11. Another work was *A Bibliography of Antislavery in America* by the same author (1961).

between 1968 and 1973, the date of the fourth re-edition of *The Conjure Woman*[12].

Although the 1973 E. P. Dutton re-edition is properly a re-writing of the text by an African-American author, it deserves, and needs, to be included in this analysis. This edition, entitled *Conjure Tales*, includes black and white illustrations of the stories, a short introduction by the re-teller, and unmistakably targets a child readership (one of E. P. Dutton's strengths was its children's literature department, the back list of which included classics by A. A. Milne and Ernest H. Shepard, creators of the famous Winnie the Pooh). Re-told, and re-shaped, Chesnutt's book had been so much transformed in this edition as to make it a product of co-authorship, as affirmed by the appearance on the front cover of both the names of Ray Anthony Shepard and Charles Chesnutt. The book was protected by a 'retelling copyright', thus falling under the category of derived product.

The last re-edition considered in this essay is one of the most valuable and interesting. Edited by literature professor Richard Brodhead and published by Duke University Press in 1993, it came out along with the author's *Journals*, also edited by Brodhead. By that time, the volume of academic work on Afro-American literature in general, and on Chesnutt in particular, had greatly increased, as some forty-six references of scholarly works on Chesnutt between 1973 and 1992 attest. Added to these, numerous anthologies and collections of Afro-American fiction were published in just the first three years of the decade, with momentous works edited by renowned scholars Henry Louis Gates and William Andrews, and the anthology *Breaking Ice*, edited by Afro-American author Terry McMillan. Afro-American fiction, new and reprinted, as well as criticism, was 'in vogue', with frequent reprints of classics from the nineteenth century – such as Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* in Henry Louis Gates's *Three Classic African-American Novels* (1990) – or from the twentieth century, including fiction by Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching*

12. *Minor American Novelists* was the title of the book in which Farnsworth published one of his first studies of Chesnutt.

God (1990), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1990) or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1992). Alongside these reprints new fiction was issued, and enthusiastically received by readers, such as the works of detective novelists Walter Mosley, Gar Anthony Haywood or Barbara Neely, or by best-selling authors Terry McMillan and Toni Cade Bambara. By the mid-1990s the field was booming, and interest was not waning, to judge from the rave reviews of the 1996 *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*[13].

Brodhead's 1993 edition of *The Conjure Woman*, hailed by fellow scholar Henry Louis Gates as 'an event in American letters, and in African-American letters', provides an introduction, a chronology of the composition of the volume, a selected bibliography, as well as seven 'related tales' that were written at the time of the original stories, but had been finally excluded from the volume under the suggestion of Chesnutt's first editor at Houghton Mifflin, Walter Hines Page.

Yet, what do these editions tell us about the book itself, as it was produced and received between the 1890s and the 1990s? If we accept, to quote Donald McKenzie, that 'forms effect meaning' (13), how did the editorial paratexts, illustrative of the contexts of publication, already define the book and ascribe it a specific category? With each 'new life' offered to the book by a publisher and an editor, *The Conjure Woman* necessarily underwent transformations that resulted, each time, in a new apprehension by the reader not only in terms of genre, but also in terms of literary, social and political significance.

When *The Conjure Woman* was first published in 1899, it was mainly promoted as Southern local colour and dialectal fiction. The cover itself was immediately reminiscent of the plantation stories of Joel Chandler Harris, with the design featuring an old black man and two rabbits (a recurrent animal in Harris's bestiary and more generally in Southern folklore) unmistakably associating Uncle Julius with his more famous 'cousin' Uncle Remus. The advertisements taken out by Houghton Mifflin in *Publishers' Weekly* emphasised the innocuous entertainment value of the book, by highlighting the 'delightful stories of Negro

13. For more on the 'explosion' of Afro-American fiction in the 1990s, see Phillip, Bass and Fleming.

superstitions and fancies' depicted by Chesnutt[14]. Moreover, the fact of promoting Chesnutt's first volume along with other volumes by reputed local colourists such as Alice Brown, Mary Hartwell Catherwood or Clara Louise Burnham, contributed to highlighting it as regionalist, local colour literature[15].

Although the 'Negro' dimension was recurrently alluded to in the editorial paratext, suggesting that Chesnutt might have been 'well acquainted' with the subject, the book was not pitched as Afro-American literature – a category that was scarcely referred to in the reviews of the period. Still, Chesnutt's African-American ancestry had been disclosed in the press as early as 1898, and taken up by Black critics in particular, mostly through parallels drawn with the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. At this point, Houghton Mifflin would have gained nothing from promoting Chesnutt as an Afro-American writer, and seemed at a loss for words to present their new author. This was apparently no longer the case for the four subsequent editions of 1928, 1968, 1969 and 1973, which all highlight Chesnutt's racial identity in their editorial paratexts; moreover, the more recent editions also draw attention to the book's political and historical importance.

Racial appropriation and the reclaiming of a tradition

The book jacket of the 1928 edition set the tone from front to back cover, all the way to the inner flaps. There was no denying the 'importance' of the book 'in the history of Negro literature' (front cover), an importance further emphasised by a quote from Carl Van Vechten's controversial *Nigger Heaven* (1926) commenting on Chesnutt: 'This man […] had surveyed the problems of his race from an Olympian height and had turned them into living and artistic drama' (176). There could no longer be any doubts as to Chesnutt's racial origins, and the very name of Van Vechten, an admirer and promoter of several Black authors of the 1920s and 1930s such as Langston Hughes, immediately

14. See the issues of *Publishers' Weekly* for 29 April, 27 May and 25 November 1899 in particular.

15. See 'Houghton, Mifflin & Co.'s Books'.

established a link between the book and the literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance[16]. The promotion on the back of the jacket as well as the inner flap of the novel *Black Sadie*, 'an elemental story of a Negro girl who becomes a famous New York dancer', further stressed the association. This novel of the Harlem Cabaret scene, although authored by a white Virginia preacher, was qualified as 'an astounding *tour de force* which deserves to stand with the very best of the negro novels'. Incidentally in a 1929 overview of the New Negro books, Chesnutt would berate *Black Sadie* for depicting the vilest women characters, thus betraying his beliefs in Victorian values and the distance he maintained with the less morally conservative writers of the Harlem Renaissance[17]. The seven other books promoted by Houghton Mifflin on the jacket, from Alain Fournier's *The Wanderer* to *The Tale of Genji*, offer no particular connection with *The Conjure Woman*.

In his preface to the edition, Joel E. Spingarn draws on the association with the New Negro writers, and contributes to establishing Chesnutt as a forefather of this generation of the 1920s. Chesnutt's colour is directly addressed – throughout the sixty lines of the preface, the term 'Negro' recurs five times, 'colored' twice – and although Spingarn places Chesnutt's work in the history of American literature at large, he readily underlines that his books were 'the first novels in which an American of Negro descent has in any real sense portrayed the fortunes of his race' (v), and that he was the first to 'give life' to this 'subject matter' (vi). He concludes with the authoritative assertion that: '[m]ore elaborate efforts have succeeded his, more intricate studies of character and subtler cadences of prose. But he was the first Negro novelist, and he is still the best' (vii).

Ultimately Spingarn's very signature tied Chesnutt with the younger generation of writers, for he was known as an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) in the 1920s, and stood as an intellectual patron of the new

16. Carl Van Vechten, art critic and novelist, was quite influential in the promotion of black artists and writers in the 1920s. His contribution to the recognition of those artists is highlighted in Coleman.

17. This critique was voiced in 'The Negro in Present Day Fiction', a speech delivered in Oberlin, Ohio. A draft of the speech is preserved in CC 11:18.

literary talents, in particular through his participation in the juries for the literary contests organised by the black magazine *Crisis*[18]. Tracing the history of an Afro-American literary tradition as far back as possible was a way of legitimising the New Negroes' artistic endeavours, and was thus of great artistic and political importance. Such an endeavour required a search for the roots of the movement, and Chesnutt and Dunbar seemed ideal for the part of 'forefathers'.

Thus, already by 1928 *The Conjure Woman* had become a 'pioneer' work and a classic, as its inclusion on the shelves of one of *Nigger Heaven*'s characters attests. As such, it was given an appropriate dressing and an 'additional note of distinction': actually, the plates from which the book was reprinted were those of the 1899 Large Paper edition, which featured a more elegant title page than the standard edition, etched in red and black – a fact that did not escape Chesnutt's notice[19].

Looking back on her career as a professor in Afro-American literature in 2000, scholar Frances Foster Smith recalled that when she taught Afro-American literature in the late 1960s, the syllabi were mostly twentieth century, and always 'overtly political' (1967). Judging from the advertising for the 1968 edition of *The Conjure Woman*, the publishers of the Gregg Press series obviously chose to highlight this socio-political dimension. These reprints of nineteenth-century fiction were presented as 'important to the study of American social and literary history, culture and folkways', as well as 'indispensable in obtaining a thorough and penetrating insight into our turbulent society'[20]. Thus the volume was to be considered in the light of the events and ideology of the 1960s. The inclusion of *The Conjure Woman* in the series attests to its rank among the classics, not of African-American literature, but of American literature.

18. See Ikonné 91-123.

19. Thanking Ferris Greenslet for reprinting the book, Chesnutt wrote on 2 February 1929: 'I like the black cover and the use of the title page from the old limited edition, which lends an additional note of distinction to the book' (Leitz et al. 245).

20. Advertisement for the Gregg Press series. *American Quarterly* 19.3 (Autumn 1967): 604.

In all likelihood Robert Farnsworth's 1969 edition of the book also responded to political interrogations of the late 1960s, and should also be considered in the wake of the Civil Rights movements. Three ideas emerge from the editorial peritext: the eminence of Chesnutt in the tradition of Afro-American literature, the folk element of the stories, and the black/white dialectic, illustrated both in the stories, and through the author's position on the literary scene. The back cover asserts that this 'important African-American author' created a work that constitutes 'an important landmark in the history of African-American fiction in the United States', a statement that echoes Spingarn's intentions in his 1928 introduction. Farnsworth's introduction opens on a central problem, the dialectic between the white reading public and the black author:

> *The Conjure Woman* […] illustrates the terms under which the white American public at the end of the nineteenth century was willing to let an Afro-American put his foot on the ladder of literary success. (v)

We might argue that this is, already, biased, since most readers at the turn of the twentieth century did not know that Chesnutt was a coloured man. If I may rephrase this assumption, the 'terms', rather, were those under which 'the white American *publishing establishment* […] was willing to let an Afro-American put his foot on the ladder of literary success'. Farnsworth continues with an evocation of the historical and racial context of the late 1870s to 1890s when Chesnutt wrote the stories, reminding his readers that 'the social position of blacks in the South was systematically eroded by Jim Crow legislation and disfranchising laws' and that '[t]he North's complicity in such acts was expressed by its withdrawal of concern and by its overlooking the brutal repression of blacks which was systematically taking place' (vi). The inelegant but eloquent repetition of the adverb *systematically* aptly emphasises his point.

The central part of the introduction, starting on page viii, offers a traditional short summary of some of the stories, as well as observations on their style and form, but this only after identification of their genre: for Farnsworth these are unmistakably folk tales, in the tradition of the plantation stories of Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. Yet he insists – invoking the authority of the author's daughter and biographer – on

the re-appropriation of their conventions and the distance with this particular genre, which were necessary to suit Chesnutt's purpose. Above the literariness of the volume, Farnsworth seemed to value the subtle political statement of the book. On page xiii, he wrote:

> The inner stories of Uncle Julius convey the indictment Chesnutt wanted to make of the master-slave relationship in implicit rebuttal of the sentimental picture that had become current in the magazine fiction of the time.

He ends his introductory text with an assessment of Chesnutt's literary career and the impediments he faced, referring to his subsequent publications that allowed him to make this 'racial statement' 'more blunt and challenging' (viii).

These first three re-editions are already characterised by a racial re-appropriation of *The Conjure Woman*, in spite of Chesnutt's discretion and vague identification with people of colour. Was it only an effect of the *Zeitgeist*? Or was it, as Werner Sollors has suggested, because the readers of the 1960s usually found Chesnutt 'not black enough' ('Literary Canonization' 49)? Whatever the reason, in presenting their re-editions of his book in this manner, editors and publishers encouraged the reading public to form an appreciation of Chesnutt's work solely on the basis of its status as a cultural artefact of the African-American heritage. The 1973 edition of *The Conjure Woman* further reinforced this trend.

The E. P. Dutton edition, along with the three prior ones, also participated in the dual shift in perspective since 1899, as it foregrounds the 'Afro-Americanity' of the book – and of its author – and makes a particular political statement of its own. The change in readership is easy to spot, this 'reworking' of the tales being clearly addressed to children, as stated in the introduction[21], and underlined by the added illustrations. What is more, some of these illustrations feature recognisably African-American characters, with full lips or sporting an Afro hairdo[22], a rare phenomenon at the time in children's books, which usually presented illustrations of white children. This, added to the fact that the re-teller,

21. Shepard wished to make this fiction available to 'younger readers' (viii).

22. See in particular the illustrations on pages 6-7, 16 and 66 of this edition.

Ray Anthony Shepard, was black, suggests that the intended juvenile readership was specifically Afro-American. It should be mentioned that Houghton Mifflin had never classified *The Conjure Woman* under 'Juvenile' in its catalogues, contrary to some of Joel Chandler Harris's books[23].

Shepard, opening his introduction on a pathetic biographical note – recalling how Chesnutt was made to drop out of school in order to help support his family after his mother's death – does not dwell on the difficulty faced by the author, but does hint at his particular position from an editorial perspective. Yet he makes a broad judgement when he writes that '[…] his readers assumed he was white, since his editors refused to tell them otherwise', blaming the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the magazine that had published Chesnutt before he appeared in book form, without looking into the particular historical context of the late 1890s. As has already been suggested, the author's colour had been revealed by the press as early as 1898. Due perhaps to the young readership at which he aims, Shepard does not emphasise either the historical conditions of the publication of the book, or even the historical background of the stories:

> It seemed to me that this was a good way of introducing Charles Chesnutt and some early Afro-American writing to younger readers. These early stories also reveal much about slavery, in a way that a tired old history book can never do. But most of all, they make for good reading. (viii)

Shepard is content with outlining the broad period in which they are set, 'in North Carolina just before the war' (viii). Indeed, he chose to keep only the 'inner stories' told by Uncle Julius, without introducing him – which makes it possible to change their original order[24] – thus disrupting the initial narrative structure and effacing the 'outside' white narrator, John. Consequently, the underlying meaning of these stories was modified, for John and his wife were both originally the prime audience of Julius's tales, and the embodiment of Chesnutt's imagined

23. See *A Portrait Catalogue of the Books Published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company*.

24. In the 1899 edition, 'The Goophered Grapevine' had been chosen as the opening story, which Chesnutt had reworked from its magazine version to add a long historical introduction. For unknown reasons, Shepard chose 'Poor Sandy' as the inaugural story.

readership, which he tried to convince of the cruelty of slavery. Robert Stepto has argued that the progression of the stories, carefully chosen by the editor, Walter Hines Page, and the author, actually demonstrated an evolution in John's understanding of pre-war culture and acceptance of Julius as a black man. The shift in the original order thus annulled this possible interpretation. From a linguistic point of view, the outside narrative by a reliable narrator had also been used as a corrective to Julius's dialect, at a time when dialects were already becoming suspicious in literature. But along with the disappearance of John, the dialect was erased from the 1973 version of Chesnutt's text.

In ridding the stories of their dialect, Shepard presumably aimed at simply facilitating their legibility. But looking at it through the prism of political consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, we might venture another analysis, and consider the disappearance of the white voice as resulting in a symbolical empowerment of the black voice. The black narrator is further rehabilitated inasmuch as he no longer makes use of the dialect, which, if popular in the late nineteenth century, might have be considered as a sign of backwardness in the 1970s; so that Shepard substitutes a message of his own for Chesnutt's 'racial statement', ironically hammering home his political point under the guise of an innocent re-telling of the stories.

Such re-editions risked entrapping *The Conjure Woman* within a category that was as much political as it was literary (if not more so), thereby restricting the range of approaches readers could bring to bear upon the text. Yet if such 'reductiveness' characterises the book's revival in the 1960s and 1970s, the most recent edition has opened a range of new perspectives. Richard Brodhead's 1993 edition is undeniably an 'augmentation' to 'the best scholarship' on the author, as another Chesnutt scholar, William L. Andrews, underlined on the back cover, and as the selected bibliography of Brodhead's edition attests. This list of references features some of the best and most renowned scholars in Afro-American and American literature – Houston Baker, Werner Sollors, Robert B. Stepto, Eric Sundquist, or the writer John Edgar Wideman. The edition's significance is multiple: first, and unsurprisingly, it reasserts the importance of *The Conjure Woman* in

the tradition of Afro-American literature, as can be seen in the editorial blurb on the back cover and in Brodhead's introduction; second, it also re-places the volume within the history of American literature 'at large', giving it

> [...] a place in the line of distinguished short story collections that runs from Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* to many more modern instances, making its own ingenious contributions to a well-established formal tradition. (1)

In so doing, Brodhead is in keeping with his predecessors from 1928 and the 1960s, and further contributes to the canonisation of the volume.

The novelty of Brodhead's edition lies in his second reason for re-editing the book, i.e. 'the book's peculiar publication history' (1). His purpose was to highlight that the book had been the result of selection, the volume having been 'carved from a much larger, and much more diverse, body of writing', and so to restore this 'body of writing' by including, in the second part of the book, the stories written by Chesnutt in the same vein, but ultimately rejected by his 1899 editor, Walter Hines Page. An exception should be made for 'The Marked Tree', which was presumably written after the publication of the volume in 1899[25]. After expounding on the genre and the literary context of the times, Brodhead sketches the peculiarly close relationship between the author and Page, which, I would argue, resulted in a genuine co-authoring of the volume[26]. Brodhead astutely chose to print the rejected stories without adding lengthy individual introductions at the beginning of each, but rather giving this information at the beginning of the volume, thus underlining the effect of a full volume made of the 1899 published version and the previously uncollected stories (25-26).

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25. 'The Marked Tree' was ultimately published in *The Crisis* 29 (December 1924): 59-64; (January 1925): 110-13. The other stories inserted by R. Brodhead are 'Lonesome Ben', 'A Deep Sleeper', 'Dave's Neckliss', 'Tobe's Tribulations', 'The Dumb Witness' and 'A Victim of Heredity'. Several reasons can account for the discarding of these stories, notably, some were too dark to be printed along with seemingly 'innocuous' tales of 'Negro fancy'.

26. The editor/author relationship between Charles W. Chesnutt and Walter Hines Page is analysed in Cottenet.

This edition is thus all the more valuable as it already presents a book historical approach, reminding the reader that a book is always the result of a collaboration between several agents – in this case, author and editor, or in Brodhead's own words, 'a collaborative product – the result of cooperating and competing pressures brought to bear by the author, his first publisher, and his later readers, ourselves included' (21). The book history perspective is further suggested in the endorsement on the back cover by Cathy Davidson, author of *Reading in America: Literature and Social History* (1989), a study in print culture. Yet there is something paradoxical in that Brodhead both brings back the editor and, to a certain extent, erases him from the picture, choosing to restore tales that had originally been rejected by this same editor. One might argue that this amounts to a negation of Page's say in the matter, and an inevitable superimposition of a second – double – editorship. Brodhead suggests just this when he concludes: '[t]his new edition will make it possible for Chesnutt's readers to take the place of his original editor and choose their own preferred version of his work' (20). But is he not already, by offering this 'augmented' version, recommending the 1993 edition as a nearly ultimate version?

And are we to accept this edition as suggested by Brodhead, as 'the Complete Conjure Woman' or 'The Unexpurgated Conjure Woman' – two titles he ironically proposes without entirely discarding them – when the version of the text that his edition proposes never existed as *The Conjure Woman*? His laudable work and scholarship bring forth another crucial question: what, or where is *this* book? And more generally, what is *the* book? We have come to believe that the text became a book as it went through various processes, completed by the paratext that finally transformed it into a book. Is Brodhead suggesting that, perhaps, the 'possibilities of a book' already make the book?

This brief survey of reprints of a small and not so popular volume of short stories over almost a century goes some way to confirming notions with which we have become familiar: the importance of the paratext, the instability of texts and the collaborative process of book-making. Unsurprisingly, the reprintings of *The Conjure Woman* have in incremental fashion contributed to the canonisation of the book, and of

its author. Once it had been acknowledged in 1928 as a classic of Afro-American literature, the story of its editions could not be dissociated from the history of Afro-American literature and of Afro-American studies. Judging from the predominant racial or ethnic dimension of Chesnutt scholarship until the 1990s, we may assert that, without the growing interest in this particular literature, *The Conjure Woman* would not have gone through such numerous re-editions.

Yet Brodhead's endeavour, at a time when Book History was making headway in the early 1990s, is all the more momentous as it contributed to taking the book out of, and beyond, this ethnic perspective. Under Brodhead's careful editorship, the book stopped being an artefact of Afro-American culture, as it seemed to have become in the 1960s and 1970s. It was restored to literary prominence by its ultimate consecration through inclusion in the prestigious Library of America collection in 2002, under the editorship of Harvard scholar Werner Sollors, prompting Afro-American critics to celebrate the fact that '[n]ow, at long last, Chesnutt has been received into the American literary canon ('Literary Canonization' 49). Perhaps the reprints that came out between 1928 and 1973 only helped the book to survive; but the 1993 edition truly gave it a new life, if only for a few years.

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